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Stage 'Bernadette' at C. U. Retains Flavor of Others

By JAY CARMODY.

When a brilliantly successful novel has been turned into an equally successful movie, the playwright who undertakes to adapt it for the stage is profoundly in a spot. He not only must perform within the much narrower limits of the theater, which compares with the novel or screen forms as a telephone booth, but also he must face a doubly high standard of performance by previous writers.

That is the spot where Walter Kerr stood when he undertook the adaptation of "The Song of Bernadette" for the stage. Let it be reported that he gets himself off of it very happily in the premiere presentation now current at Catholic University theater, a superb piece of dramatic writing which not merely preserves the essence of the original but in some respects heightens its values. The latter quality is most pleasingly evident in the fact that the comedy elements, which were inherent, but unstressed in the novel and avoided in the picture, are superbly developed in the version which Kerr wrote with his wife, Jean, as collaborator. The touch of Louis comes off with a much more rounded human, although not quite without exception, as a result. They make as fascinating a group as has occupied the university's stage in the years of its advance to national prominence.

It was the notion of none of the sponsors of this "Bernadette" that it should be more than an acting version available to non-professional groups for performance. But what emerged is definitely no much more than that, but none in the opening night's enthusiastic audience can see the one week's engagement as a logical limit for the Kerr version. It is, in fact, a masterpiece of inspiration and story. It is not merely a piece of exquisite literary craftsmanship but one on which Ralph Brown has done a superb piece of production and which has fired all non-professional cast to the highest level of performance attained to date in the University theater. Its end is no more in sight, unless the commercial theater is more bold than we think, than the career of 17-year-old Elizabeth Ross, who is no less than starting Bernadette.

The adaptation of Werfel's novel presented an extremely difficult task of selection. Kerr's first brilliant step in accomplishing it was in the decision to tell the story with 18 instead of the 24 major characters used in the earlier narrative. Then he dragged down with no sense of loss whatever to the spectator, but gives it rather a tautness, freshness, and in the stressed comedy factors, a special kind of robustness that emphasizes the mystical. Werfel is there, but so are Walter and Jean Kerr, and that is quite to the advantage of this third variation of one of the best novel themes of the decade. In compressing the story within the limits of three acts and 10 scenes, Kerr was compelled also to dispose of much of the narrative material created by Werfel. His choice of what to keep and what to

throw away represents as fine a piece of judgment of its kind as the theater has seen in years. He has been most careful to keep Bernadette intact, a delicate child, naive, perfectly designed for mystical experience, and through that experience strengthened to resist and conquer the ignorantly brutal and cleverly cruel forces determined to destroy her. On top of that, he has inspired a performance out of pretty, diminutive Miss Ross that allows not a jot of the role's meaning to be lost in its interpretation.

The one apparent loss in dramatic value visible in this version of Werfel's play is in the character of Dean Peyramale. The dean, played by Dick Sykes, is a less kindly man than you will remember him from the book, more an antagonist of the church and aloof from the emotional experience of those involved in Bernadette's miracle.

This is the single exception to the rule that Werfel's people shall come off equally as well, or better, in Kerr's treatment. The "better" applies most especially to Bernadette, the proud, forthright aunt of the Scourge, who makes a wonderfully comic character in her dithering determination to protect her tormented niece. It is also true of the parents, defeated Franciscans and the dean's daughter, who are as well as pitiable characters, the playwright has increased their dramatic stature without changing their essential nature.

Another excellent character job in much smaller scope than was allowed in the novel or the picture is that of Sister Vauzous, the ascetic skeptic whose harrassment was one of the most goading influences in the life of Bernadette.

To sum up, in the limits of the space left for "The Song of Bernadette," Prof. Kerr and his wife, rate straight "A" grades on one of the trickiest play writing assignments of a dozen seasons.

Young Love, Young O'Connor Paired Again in Keith Film
By PATRICIA SIMMONS.
The untarnished type of cupid's complex known as an adolescent's crush is supposed to be a very normal impulse, particularly when the young lady in question is 18 and when the object of her affection possesses just the right amount of gray hair indispensable to such devotion. Principal reason Keith's current feature refuses to run along in this same normal fashion could be due to no one but Donald O'Connor. As far as we can figure out, O'Connor's place on the screen should be safe as long as he continues to send people home happy that he's at a downtown theater and not living next door. "This is the Life" makes fair use of O'Connor as a foil for Miss Foster's emotional metamorphosis, but why, we ask, were those spasmodic interruptions from Peggy Ryan inserted? Her part, the type of Joan Davis comedy, either alone or with complimentary antics from Mr. O'Connor, makes the Dead End Kids look apathetic.

Miss Foster is pretty enough to flatter any man by her attentions, sought or unsought. She can sing and she can act, but why doesn't somebody teach her how to walk? She can't blame that on the director. You can't blame that on the director. You can't blame that on the director. You can't blame that on the director.

Between singing lessons and growing up, Miss Foster manages one of the most amusing screen proposals we've seen and what's more, gets it. She thinks her worries are over, well, she's long enough to sing a song or two, glamorous Louise Albritton appears and converts the triangle into a very confusing square. She's Mr. O'Connor's ex-wife, who has plenty of what appeals to a man in Mr. O'Connor's own words. From here on, the ending is inevitable, but drags long enough for Peggy Ryan's version of "Grimm's Walk" and "You're a La La Poodle," which was dragging it two songs too long.

Movies Worry Over Postwar
By HAROLD HEFFERNAN.
HOLLYWOOD. Motion Picture Producers Association can hardly hide the real reason behind its frantic efforts to interest Eric Johnston, president of the United States Chamber of Commerce, in taking over a big movie post.

The film business is frankly worried about the postwar period. Both England and Russia already have tremendous film production plans ready to launch when hostilities cease. Hollywood doesn't want to be left out in the cold. Consequently, there is a steaming battle raging behind the plush corridors of movieland.

What would happen to Will Hays if Johnston accepted the post? Nobody knows, but certainly there would be no sense in Johnston's sitting behind the Hays desk.

Mark up one of Hollywood's toughest-luck weeks: Ward Bond so severely injured by auto accident that he may lose a leg. Danny Kaye, playing two roles in "The Wonder Man," for Sam Goldwyn, injures leg and may hold up production six weeks. Arthur Treacher's tonsils nipped. Milred Harris, first wife of Charlie Chaplin, dies. Anne Shirley in hospital for major operation.

Boris Karloff, Ditto, for spinal operation, after collapse on set. Ida Lupino and Captain John Hayward announce separation.

Veteran Alan Dinehart dies of heart attack. Jon Hall injures arm when caught among stampeding horses in Universal film about a southerner-hunting bellhop and Mrs. Alfred Hitchcock reported loss of money and jewels.

Just one long procession of grief. You still wanna come to Hollywood?

News in nibbles: Bette Davis, star



BEFORE CAMERAS AGAIN—But not those of Hollywood, is Lt. (j. g.) Robert Taylor, who is making a series of aviation shorts for the Navy.

—Wide World Photo.

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Stage.
National—"Early to Bed": 8:30 p.m.
Screen.
Capitol—"Bathing Beauty": 11:05 a.m., 1:45, 4:25, 7:05 and 9:45 p.m.
Stage shows: 1:05, 3:45, 6:25 and 9:05 p.m.
Columbia—"White Cliffs of Dover": 11:20 a.m., 1:55, 4:35, 7:10 and 9:45 p.m.
Little—"Taxi to Heaven": 11 a.m., 12:25, 2:20, 4:10, 6:10 and 9:40 p.m.
Keith's—"This is the Life": 11:45 a.m., 1:45, 4:25, 7:05, 9:45 and 11:45 p.m.
Little—"Going My Way": 11:25 a.m., 1:55, 4:25, 7:05 and 9:45 p.m.
Metropolitan—"Mr. McGee Goes to War": 11:55 a.m., 1:50, 3:50, 5:45, 7:40 and 9:40 p.m.
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